

# *Helping a Child Deal with Death*

## **Overview**

Suggestions for ways to help a child deal with military service-related death

- Some guidelines
- Knowing they are not alone
- Finding support

What can an adult say to a child following the death of a beloved family member or friend? Children often ask probing or painful questions. For a grieving adult, it may seem daunting to have to explain death to a child, especially when there are no simple answers. The following guidelines may make this process easier.

## **Some guidelines**

- *It is OK to say you don't know the answer to a child's question.* You can even say, "No one knows for sure, but this is what I think."
- *Consider a child's age and ability to understand complex ideas.* Many experts believe children do not have a mature understanding of death until about age eight or nine. Younger children may think that being dead is temporary, and that the dead person will return in the future.
- *Use precise terms when talking about death.* People typically refer to "losing" a loved one. Children may interpret this literally and assume that the person can be found. You should also explain that being dead means that the body has stopped working and that it cannot be fixed. It no longer feels cold or gets hungry. The good side of this is that a dead body does not feel any more hurt or pain.
- *If the child asks whether you will die, respond that everybody dies someday, but that you hope to live to do things with the family for a long time.*
- *Remember that children cannot tolerate long periods of sadness.* This means that they may want to play and participate in their usual activities. This does not mean that they didn't love the person who died, nor does it mean that they are being disrespectful. It is okay to permit or encourage children to have fun like they did before the death.
- *Changes in the child's behavior or patterns might be signs that the child is experiencing problems associated with the death.* In these instances, it's appropriate to obtain advice from a specialist in child bereavement counseling.

## **Knowing they are not alone**

Many children benefit by participating in bereavement groups with other children who have suffered loss like the TAPS Good Grief Camp for Young Survivors. They discover they are not alone. Children hate to be different from their peers, and being bereaved makes them different. (To find out more about

the camp and about other ways that TAPS supports families, visit TAPS online at [www.taps.org](http://www.taps.org) or call 800-959-TAPS.)

Although you may not know what to say, don't avoid bereaved children. Tell them that you love them and, although you may be sad and crying, you will always love them and take care of them. Also, learn to express your own grief. You'll find the strength to carry out these suggestions, and you and the child will feel better as a result.

### **Finding support**

Many people find it helpful to talk about their grief with someone who understands what they are going through. Expert counselors and support groups exist that can provide you with support and understanding and suggest ways to handle the challenges you face.

The following resources can help you and your family:

#### **T\*A\*P\*S (The Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors)**

[www.TAPS.org](http://www.TAPS.org)

800-959-TAPS (800-959-8277)

TAPS is a national organization that offers a broad range of support, mentoring, and other services to those grieving the loss of a loved one whose death occurred while serving in the armed forces. TAPS services include the following:

- A nationwide peer support network
- Information and resources on coping with grief and trauma
- 24/7 support via the TAPS hotline (800-959-TAPS)
- Resources and material online
- Weekly online support groups
- A quarterly magazine for casualty survivors

These services are offered free of charge, and no membership dues are charged.

In addition, TAPS clients mark their calendars for Memorial Day weekend in Washington, DC to attend the Annual "National Military Survivor" seminar and annual "Good Grief Camp" for kids and young survivors.

#### **Military OneSource**

This 24-hour employee assistance program is available to all active duty, Guard, and Reserve members and their families. Consultants provide advice

over the help line and make referrals. You can reach the program by telephone or through the Web site for your service:

- Army OneSource at 800-464-8107 or [www.armyonesource.com](http://www.armyonesource.com) (user name: army; password: onesource)
- Air Force OneSource at 800-707-5784 or [www.airforceonesource.com](http://www.airforceonesource.com) (user name: airforce; password: ready)
- MCCS OneSource at 800-869-0278 or [www.mccsonesource.com](http://www.mccsonesource.com) (user name: marines; password: semperfi)
- Navy OneSource at 800-540-4123 or [www.navyonesource.com](http://www.navyonesource.com) (user name: navy; password: sailor)

Written by Nancy Boyd Webb, DSW, BCD, RPT-S, and the Distinguished Professor of Social Work at Fordham University. She is a noted authority on play therapy.

© 2005 The Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS). All rights reserved to TAPS.